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ABSTRACT

Interviewing has been a recognized mainstay of ethnographic fieldwork for more than 100 years. Coupled with participant observation, it was taken to be the complete corpus of anthropological and sociological inquiry activity. Although the repertoire of fieldwork inquirers has grown, interviewing remains a primary data collection technique, especially for gathering knowledge and understanding about "lived experience." One of the mainstays of interviewing technique has been termed "rapport," the researcher's achievement of sufficient sympathy or empathy with the interviewee that he or she is wiling to share critical or intimate data with the researcher. Rapport has remained a given of fieldwork method, but some researchers and theorists warned early on that assuming a consensus model of social research was probably unrealistic, especially since social life is characterized by conflict and dissension. The interaction between the mandate to achieve rapport and the acknowledgement that conflict accompanies pluralism must be taken into account in fieldwork. This paper explores the inner tension between achieving rapport and acknowledging social conflict and the inability to achieve rapport as an interviewing phenomenon present in ethnographic fieldwork. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Reconsidering Rapport: Interviewing as Postmodern Inquiry Practice

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Abstract, Reconsidering Rapport

Interviewing has been a recognized mainstay of ethnographic fieldwork for over 100 years. Coupled with participant observation, it was taken to be the complete *corpus* of anthropological and sociological inquiry activity. Times change, and the repertoire of fieldwork inquirers has grown considerably (see, for instance, Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; 1994), even while the interview appears to have remained a primary data collection technique, especially for gathering knowledge and understanding regarding what Turner and Bruner (1986) call "lived experience". One of the mainstays of interviewing technique has been termed "rapport", or the researcher's achievement of sufficient sympathy and/or empathy with the interviewee that s/he will be willing to share critical and/or intimate data with the researcher. Indeed, from the early part of the twentieth century, rapport has remained a fundamental given of fieldwork method, even having gone so far as to have been transferred into critical ethnography. But some researchers and theorists warned early on that assuming a consensus model of social research was probably unrealistic, especially since social life is characterized by vast rifts, conflicts, and dissensus. Interviewing under a conflict model of social life has been little explored, as a consequence, and we do not know what the interaction is between the mandate to achieve rapport and the acknowledgement that conflict accompanies pluralism: it must be taken into account in fieldwork. This paper explores the inner tension between, on the one hand, achieving rapport and, on the other hand, acknowledging social conflict and the inability to achieve rapport as an interviewing phenomenon increasing present in ethnographic fieldwork.

Reconsidering Rapport

Interviewing has been one of the recognized mainstays of ethnographic fieldwork for over 100 years. When coupled with participant observation, it has been considered as the complete *corpus* of anthropological and sociological inquiry activity (see, for instance, Strauss, in McCall and Simmons, 1969; Wax, 1971). Times change, and the repertoire of fieldwork inquirers has grown considerably (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; 2000; in press), even while interviewing appears to have remained a primary data collection technique, especially for gathering knowledge and understanding regarding what Turner and Bruner (1986) term "lived experience". One of the mainstays of interviewing technique has been termed "rapport", or the researcher's achievement of sufficient sympathy and/or empathy with the interviewee that s/he will be willing to share critical, confidential and/or intimate data with the researcher.

Indeed, from the early part of the twentieth century on, rapport has remained a fundamental given of fieldwork method, viewed as part and parcel of "gaining entrè", and has even found its way into critical ethnography. But some researchers and theorists warned early on that there were problems with rapport. Miller (1969) for example, warned against "over-rapport" , or the assumption of a consensus model of social research, especially in light of a social world characterized by vast rifts, conflicts, and dissensus. Interviewing under a conflict model of social life has been little explored, as a consequence, and we do not know what the interaction is between the mandate to achieve rapport and the acknowledgement that conflict accompanies pluralism. Yet this interaction must be taken into account in fieldwork.

What follows is an exploration of the inner tensions between achieving rapport and acknowledging social conflict, and the inability to achieve rapport as an interviewing phenomenon increasingly present in postmodern ethnographic fieldwork. What are the barriers to achieving rapport? Is rapport a modernist concept which serves to objectify respondents as mere data sources? Or is it, rather, an extension of the romanticized Other and the noble fieldwork adventure? Does rapport embody assumptions about the Western "science project" which need to be deconstructed and overturned, or at least bracketed as a potential discursive practice which further sets ethnographers into a colonialist mold? What does attempting to achieve rapport do?

Rapport as a consensus-model requisite

Douglas (1976) pulled aside the curtain on a rift in North American social science which has not been yet fully addressed: the differences between classical, "cooperative" models of social science and field research, and a paradigm of conflictual social life. Classical social science, according to Douglas, relies on three unproven, and likely false, assumptions or theories. The first theory was that society was "basically homogeneous and nonconflictual", an assumption which led to a "one-man-one-small-community" form of research agenda, the result of which would be a kind of "mosaic",

which, once assembled, would provide a holistic picture of a whole city (pp. 45-47). One criticism of that theory which might be mounted today would be that, in both form and assumptional base, it is a model constructed on the "building blocks" basis of conventional positivistic science. While this mosaic approach is methodologically consonant and coherent with a positivist model of research, it is incapable of dealing with methodological considerations which lie outside of that model, including conflict. The whole is necessarily more complex than the sum of its parts.

A second flaw with the theory of society as nonconflictual and "unproblematic" was the "methodological implication...that the researcher could rely upon the cooperation of his subjects in doing the research", and that their behavior would be free of unnaturalness, deception, fronts, lies or misdirection. In fact, according to Douglas (1976), "The classical paradigm exudes the small-town Protestant public morality of openness, friendliness and do-gooderism....[where] Everything is open and aboveboard, honesty all around" (p. 47). Such stances frequently led to a posture of "sympathy" on the part of the researcher, with things not being as they seemed to those who were not a party to the research.

The third flaw in this classical, cooperative "big picture of society" model of research was that "research could be done from one perspective within the group and the report written from the one perspective of the host group" (Ibid., p. 48). The consequences of this methodological implication led to an approach which presents groups as without conflicts or tensions within themselves, and social reality as "uni-perspectival".

Each of these related assumptions and implications act to create a picture of society either without conflict, or without unresolvable conflict. In fact, it was the role of the social scientist himself to demonstrate that simply by thinking differently about some social issue, the issue became a non-problem; the putative issue was a consequence of not having sufficient data regarding a social problem, or of not thinking "correctly" about a social problem, which thinking could be corrected via the objective social truths presented by the social scientist him/herself.

This view of society as unproblematic, nonconflictual, homogeneous and essentially uniperspectival is naïve, however. Douglas argues that there is, quite likely, a better model for investigating the social world, the "investigative paradigm", wherein

> "the assumption [is made] that profound conflicts of interests, values, feelings and action pervade social life. It is taken for granted that many of the people one deals with, perhaps all people to some extent, have good reason to hide from others what they are doing, and even lie to them. Instead of trusting people and expecting truth in return, one suspects others and expects others to suspect him. Conflict is the reality of life; suspicion is the guiding principle." (Douglas, 1976, p. 55).

If this is the model of the social world which we experience—and I and others believe it to be (I will say more about this later)—then some mixture of cooperative and investigative, or conflictual, methods should be employed.

Douglas does outline multiple kinds of deceptions which can and do occur throughout social life, which present serious problems for the methodological repertoire of social scientists as well as for methodological accuracy: misinformation, evasions, lies and fronts. In addition, he discusses three other serious issues present at the methodological level which impair the ability of social scientists to create adequate representations of meanings and lived experience: taken-for-granted meanings, problematic meanings, and researcher and researched self-deception (Ibid., pp. 83-106). Both the model of a cooperative society awaiting the social scientist, and the possibility of difficulties with other forms of deceptions, lead almost inescapably to the conclusion that cooperative models of social science alone, including the potential of achieving rapport, may be problematic at best, and delusional at worst.

Rapport as a modernist concept

As well as being postulated on a consensus model of social life, rapport may well be far too entrenched in a modernist model of research to be useful in all interviews. Constructions of rapport presume that social scientists and those whom they take to be their research participants (and subjects) can ultimately find some ground in common, some temporary modus vivendi which permits them to speak as confidant and confider regarding some phenomenon. The assumption that even a temporary relationship may be built around a common theme or purpose is strongly related to the Enlightenment tenet that society can make progress, and indeed, that its trajectory is upward toward gradual abolition of social ills. The consequence of this belief—part and parcel of the liberal tradition—is the presumption that all segments of society will cooperate in the elimination of social injustice and evil. The peculiarly modernist twist to this Enlightenment philosophy is that social injustice can and will be eradicated via social science, or social engineering.

This assumption, however, fails to take account either of entrenched interests in maintenance of the status quo, or the power asymmetries in social research, where frequently the inquirer holds many of the cards, including terminal degrees, high-status employment, and access to funding and other forms of institutional support, while the respondent may hold only a few, or virtually none.

It is not that respondents do not understand rapport. Quite the opposite. Frequently, respondents understand all too well the researcher's efforts to establish rapport. Respondents, however, recognizing either power asymmetries, or understanding themselves as tied to established interests, have no interest in even the pretext of rapport. The assumption of a modernist social science—to wit, that all participants in social research are on the same song sheet—is again a naïve one. The unexamined contexts of a modernist social

science serve only to obscure assumptions surrounding the social science project, particularly the assumptions regarding common aims or social purposes widely shared between and among respondents.

Rapport as a gender-laden requisite

Rapport in interviewing suffers from yet another assumption: that with practice and skill, interviewers can establish rapport with virtually any interviewee. Such an assumption, however, has been thoroughly deconstructed. It is now well understood that gender, race, and class are also widely implicated in what is communicated during interviews.

The difficulties inherent in cross-cultural, cross-ethnic, and cross-racial research have been understood at least in a preliminary way for many years (Montero, 1977; Myers, 1977; Trimble, 1977; Warren, 1977; Weiss, 1977; Zusman and Olson, 1977; Callan and McElwain, 1980). More recent research points to issues far more subtle than interviewers ever imagined, including sensitivity to class issues (Weis, 1988), widely regarded as the least-understood and most-ignored facet of American social science research; sensitivity to a double-consciousness among minority populations (see, for instance, Ladson-Billings, 2000; Jules-Rosette, 1986); and sensitivity to the multiple effects of gender on interview outcomes (Oakley, 1981).

Because it is the most readily identifiable characteristic of interview respondents, gender focuses the interview context in ways which also partly illuminate the nature of race, ethnicity and class. There are issues of power which come into play, and which undermine rapport, when interviewer and interviewee are not the same gender. While power equals may understand the world in much the same way, the same cannot be said of interview contexts between power-elite males and subaltern women. Further, research suggests that women may be more sensitive to the power imbalances between themselves and men than men are. Wariness, caution, hesitations, silences, all may punctuate an interview between a male interviewer and a female interviewee. Power inequalities between the genders may undermine rapport in ways which the interviewer, in particular, may be at a loss to understand, or worse, may not even recognize as present.

There are, likewise, epistemological issues; women's experiences of the world are frequently unlike those of males, and consequently, the poststructuralist critique comes into play: words do not necessarily mean the same thing to women as to men. Referents may be unclear, shifting and unstable in the communication between males and females. Questions may not "mean" the same thing to women as they do to the men who ask them. Oakley (1981) outlines three other problems with gender in interviewing women.

First, she criticizes the traditional methodological assumption that interviewing is a one-way exchange, where the interviewer requests, and takes, information, but divulges nothing of him/herself. From this methodological perspective, rapport serves the function of enabling the elicitation of data, but stops short of demanding that some "exchange" take place. Women

interviewing women, however, may come to understand the interview relationship differently. Among women, both empathy and epistemology may be shared. And certainly, the possibility for building rapport based on similar experiences (childbirth, childcare, work experiences) is higher when women interview women.

Second, Oakley observes that this one-way process functions to "allocate the [interviewee]...a narrow and objectified function as data" (1981, p. 30, emphasis added), a criticism of conventional science made even broader by Fox Keller (1985), when she asserts that traditional and conventional means of data gathering under a positivist paradigm demonstrate the characteristic of objectifying all research respondents (especially as they are termed "subjects") as research data sources, rather than as human beings with agency.

Third, Oakley comments that conventional methodological treatments of interviewing treat interviews merely as data-gathering activities, with little or no "personal meaning in terms of social interaction" (1981, p. 30). The meaning of interviews, Oakley suggests, is largely assigned by men, and as traditionally construed, belong to a "masculine" model of social science. The "masculinity" of interviews, however, may be overturned in woman-to-woman interviews, where the purposes of interviews may be overtly or covertly redefined by the participants in ways which masculinist research proponents would find unscientific, overly intimate, or not suitably distanced.

Rapport as the "deconstructed methodology" of colonialism

In the world of indigenous peoples, rapport may have a particularly smarmy character. Jokes abound of native American peoples' views of anthropologists; they are widely taken to be fools, and are often fooled by informants and respondents (Wax, 1971) as a matter of course. More importantly, it seems to me, is the issue of how indigenous peoples now construct fieldwork in its broadest sense. Increasingly, anthropological and ethnographic fieldwork is taken to be a part of the larger colonialist project, wherein the methodology of social science reinscribes via discursive practices the legitimacy of colonialist practices and the erasing of the indigenous perspective (L. Smith, 1999). From within the post-colonial perspective[1], the Western project of social science brings to bear a set of discursive practices which further denigrate, obscure or erase the indigenous experience, and which serve to reify the "rightness" of colonization in the first instance. Any and all methods and methodologies which service this agenda are suspect (L. Smith, 1999).

There is, as both Nandy (1989) and Smith (1999) observe, a kind of "code" or " 'grammar' of imperialism", the function of which is to secure a "deep structure which regulates and legitimates imperial practices" (Smith, p. 28). This is so, Smith points out, because

> Writing is part of theorizing and writing is part of history. Writing, history and theory, then are key sites in which Western

> research of the indigenous world have come together....[This is possible because] the Western culture archive functions in ways which allow shifts and transformations to happen, quite radically at times, without the archive itself, and the modes of classifications and systems of representation contained within it, being destroyed....Systems of classification and representation enable different traditions or fragments of traditions to be retrieved and reformulated in different contexts as discourses, and then to be played out in systems of power and domination, with real material consequences for colonized peoples. (pp. 28,44)

If Smith and Nandy are correct—that the language of science serves imperialism and colonialism as much as it serves the easy exchange between scientists (or more)—then the discourse surrounding rapport must appear, to indigenous peoples, to be repugnant indeed. From the perspectives of indigenous peoples, whose understandings at both the intuitive and the theoretical level are that "theories about research are underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race" (Smith, 1999, p. 44), the project of Western science is principally about a form of domination. This particular form of domination usurps indigenous cultural systems of classification and representation, indigenous views about human nature, human morality and virtue, and indigenous conceptions of time, space, gender, race and tribal relations.

It is hardly any wonder that 20th century social scientists, with their cultural histories of impugning savagery and their perceived baggage of colonial and imperial interests, are hardly perceived to be in a position to expect rapport. Rapport, in a methodological sense, does not mean what it means in a psychological sense, as Oakley (1981) makes clear. Methodologically, rapport means "the acceptance by the interviewee of the interviewer's research goals and the interviewee's active search to help the interviewer in providing the relevant information. The person who is interviewed has a passive role in adapting to the definition of the situation offered by the person doing the interviewing" (p. 35). Why might indigenous peoples, having already experienced the staggering loss of colonization (Nandy, 1989) wish to further this loss by buying into the interviewer's definition of appropriate research goals?[2]

Rapport in an Age of Pluralism, Globalism and Profound Value Conflicts

It is not merely that American social life is rife with overt and covert social conflict, although a growing pluralism in the U.S. should have suggested that to us more strongly (Lincoln, 1993). It is that the entire world is confronted with conflict. As we know more, see more, have more brought into our homes via media from around the world, we understand that religion, cultural values, social and economic conflict have moved from a regional specialty to global unrest. The cultural images and conceptions which

undergird such conflict preclude the possibility of a universal rapport with respondents. When we are working in our own culture, with individuals groups like ourselves, rapport, at least in its former psychological sense—a sympathetic relationship—may be possible. It has even been fruitful, especially as it has emerged in the contexts of women interviewing women regarding concerns which are generally considered to be feminist or womanist, or shared in the experiences of women (Anzaldúa, 2000). But we cannot assume that rapport—the first rule of productive interviewing—is a valuable or worthwhile export. It is not certain that it is even a worthwhile domestic commodity. Where does that leave us?

Alternative Considerations/Constructions of Rapport

It is not clear that rapport is salvageable. Like rigor, a concept tied to experimental designs and the statistical manipulation of data, rapport may be so tied to modernist concerns for objectivity, and so implicated in the treatment of respondents as data sources, needing coaching in how to be "proper" interview subjects, that it lacks real utility as a methodological concern transferable to phenomenological and postmodern models of qualitative research. Certainly, the postmodern turn in anthropology and qualitative research more broadly implies that efforts to coach interviewees in how to be good interviewees is probably a misdirected and silly exercise. If all truth is partial, socially located and grounded, and claims to perfect (or complete, or objective) truth suspect, then methods or stratagems which purport to aid interviewers in extracting more complete, objective, or near-perfect data from informants are probably foolish.

It is quite likely that, as advice on how graduate students might approach potential interviewees, rapport is sensible; however, as methodological repertory, rapport is probably fatally flawed, and consequently unsalvageable. It is too heavily implicated in much of what has brought on the postmodern critique, the criticism of modernist science projects, the rejection of masculinist methods by feminist researchers (Harding, 1987; Keller, 1985; Reinharz, 1979, 1992), and the rising tide of postcolonial criticisms of Western research methodologies and Eurocentric narratives (Smith, 1999; Beverley, 1999; Pérez, 1999; Wing, 2000), as well as the continuing importation of Western and U.S. practices into countries where racial structures become reinscribed trans-globally.

Given the criticisms limned above, and given the limited possibilities for resuscitating rapport as a meaningful tool within a postmodern and phenomenological (and constructivist) framework for research, perhaps it would be better abandoned with the remainder of positivist requirements for so-called rigorous research. What, then, are we left? We still face the realities of interviewing and other fieldwork research methods, even though we understand it may be under conditions of social conflict rather than social cooperation. We still find ourselves curious about, and socially ignorant of, the lifeways of others, which leads us to continue pursuing research. If rapport won't work, what will? Are there places where we can look for guidance regarding how to

interview with discretion, openness, some sense of the common human condition? I believe there are.

Rapport as genuine sympathy. Studs Terkel was asked (Wolf, 1984) how he managed to interview neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan members, and others whose social views were characterized by intolerance, prejudice and outright hatred. How could he bear to even talk to such individuals, much less manage to report their life histories in such seemingly full and open ways. "I interview them *sympathetically*", Terkel replied. He went on to say that while he understood that their social and political views were antithetical to his, he also understood that their prejudice and racial intolerance were learned behaviors, and that he was interested, as a "chronicler" of American social life, in understanding how they got to this stage of their lives. Terkel's idea of genuine human sympathy may work, in part, to salvage our connection to others as part of social science work.

Women have found this genuine sympathy to be meaningful for both participants. Keating (2000) calls this interview process between women a "community-making ritual" (p. xii), with the interviewee taking an active part in "try[ing] to get to know your interviewer, try[ing] to break down the barriers that so often inhibit effective communication" (p. xii). The job of interviewing is not just hard work on the part of the interviewer; it is also a reciprocal process, wherein the interviewee works, too, at trying to create the circumstances where communication can be clear, responsive and unambiguous. Keating, however, is writing in reference to interviews between individuals who have similar stations in life. This in interviewing between equals, where both interviewer and interviewee have something serious at stake, and where both must work to enhance the process to which they will both give many hours. Symmetries of power are at work here, not only because the parties about whom Keating writes are roughly equals, but also because both are heavily invested in the process, and because a level of trust is not only assumed, it is invited to the conversation and reaffirmed.

What if the power between interviewer and interviewee is not roughly equal?

Sympathy as a means of equalizing power. True sympathy—the original meaning of rapport in a psychological and social sense--may not only be a means of expressing equal power, it may be possible to express authentic sympathy as a means of equalizing power. This vision of rapport is linked directly and indirectly to the stance of participatory action researchers. Practitioners of participatory action research (PAR) put themselves at the service of those with whom they engage in research. The goals of PAR practitioners are less those of publication and traditional research, and far more oriented to transformational social action, action which is itself directed toward redistribution of social power and material wealth. Such transformatory work may not suit all social researchers, but PAR does provide a model for thinking about relationships with interviewees. It is especially powerful in suggesting that interviewees should be offered some fair exchange, something more than the rather vague promise that by helping, "things will be better", or

"things will change". PAR practitioners offer the very real exchange of providing participants in research with information, with data, with methods which permit participants to engage in their own inquiries, and with strategies for taking action in their own domains.

Rapport as the desire for solidarity. Beyond the sense of a genuine exchange provided by the practitioners of PAR, there is a further border. It is suggested by Rorty, but pursued by Beverley (1999). Beverley believes that what Rorty (1985) calls "the desire for solidarity" (in opposition to the "desire for objectivity") is a good starting place for relationships with subalterns (and colonized, dominated, or oppressed peoples more broadly). Beverley does, however, see some problems with Rorty's formulation:

> ...there is a way in which the (necessarily?) liberal political slant Rorty gives the idea of solidarity may also be, as the 1960s slogan has it, part of the problem rather than part of the solution, because it assumes that "conversation" is possible across power/exploitation divides that radically differentiate the participants. (1999, p. 39).

Dussel (1995, cited in Beverley, 1999) sees the same problem: "[W]hen Rorty argues for the desirability of 'conversation' in place of rational epistemology, he does not take seriously the assymetrical situation of the other..." (p. 174).

Despite these criticisms, Beverley believes that the desire for solidarity can move academic and institutional knowledge closer and more proximate to the lives of those for whom we have previously believed we spoke. We cannot "be" them. We cannot even "speak for" them. We can, however, understand the limits to our knowledge, and "...register...how the knowledge we construct and impart as academics is structured by the absence, difficulty, or impossibility of representation..." (p. 40).

Clearly, solidarity is far more than sympathy. One might characterize the sympathy-solidarity relationship as a continuum, with the interviewer's position on the continuum dictated by the interviewees one confronts. The more power the interviewee holds (that is, the more symmetric the relation between interviewer and interviewee) the more likely the relationship is to be one of sympathy, an authentic willingness to understand and be taught about the interviewee's construction of the world. The less power the interviewee holds, the more likely the relationship needs to be one of exchange or solidarity. Solidarity comes much closer to the model of liberation theology; researcher and researched come together in a sense of mutuality [and shared destiny], in order to create and transform knowledge into useful praxis and action.

Whatever its current form, rapport as a tactic deployed in interviewing seems badly married to positivist science. New commitments are in order; whether interviewing is seen as community-building (as it often is in feminist research), authentic sympathy, social exchange, or the creation of solidarity, this is not rapport. Debilitating power imbalances, postmodern commitments, the problems of postcolonialism, the decidedly masculinist bent to control: all

serve to make rapport as it is currently constructed an inappropriate and probably ineffective tool for conducting interview activities.

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[1] As Linda T. Smith makes quite clear, "post-colonialist" is a misnomer. She reports on an indigenous activist standing up to ask, at a conference on postcolonial studies, "Postcolonial? What? Have they left?" In a few brief words, it makes clear that postcolonial refers not to a period when "they" have left; rather, it simply makes clear that the period of active colonizing by Western Europeans of lands formerly held by indigenous peoples, particularly in Africa, the Antipodes, the Indian subcontinent, and throughout the Pacific Rim, is largely over. Postcolonial does not refer to a mass movement where those of European origin have "gone home", or returned to Western Europe. It refers, rather, to a time when indigenous peoples (as well as the descendants of Western European colonizers) come to terms with what has been lost, and activate a project of recovery and reclamation.

[2] This is another reason why positivist science has proven so unfruitful with indigenous peoples in some ways. The maintenance of the fiction that the interviewee has to buy into the definition of research goals and situation definitions of the researcher provides another strong argument for action research, participatory action research, and other interviewee-focussed, research goals.